

An Easy Road

by Thuggery

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Summary: Before the Flood, before the Covenant, mankind was already doing a pretty good job of killing itself.

## 1. Chapter 1

"The United Earth Government does not and never will approve of assassination. Assassination, as well as conspiracy to commit assassination, are crimes according to UEG law."

-Official statement by President Carlos Valjean of the United Nations General Assembly; 5 December 2410

\* \* \*

><p><strong>Unified Ground Command Fort Cole, Nua Manila<strong>

\*\*Far Isle\*\*

\*\*0822 Military Standard Time\*\*

\*\*21 September 2488\*\*

Named after one of the long-dead heroes of the Rainforest Wars, Fort Cole sat close to the center of Nua Manila. Its bright gray polycrete walls rose three stories high and were topped at intervals with guard towers. The shadow that the facilities within cast fell over much of the area dependent on the time of day. It was a reminder of the might of the United Nations Space Command. It was also a reminder that they would be around to watch over and protect the citizens of Nua Manila should any harm befall them.

And it wasn't like the locals really minded their presence in the first place. Established concurrently with Nua Manila during the initial colonization of Far Isle, Fort Cole had been a constant for many. The garrison was generally courteous and the commandants had

made a tradition of allowing and holding public celebrations within its walls. Founding Day, Solstice, Ninoy Aquino Day, New Year, in addition to Saint Stephen's Day, Samhain, and many other holidays found a home within the walls of Fort Cole. The main bone of contention was the amount of air traffic the base had brought along with it.

Almost day in and day out there were aircraft taking off and landing. Anyone who had not invested in soundproofing for their homes were constantly made aware of the passing of UH-144 Falcons, the new unmanned aerial vehicles, and whatever other aircraft in the UNSC arsenal happened to land there. The high-pitched whines and deeper humming was generally politely ignored.

This was again the case as a D77 Pelican made an unscheduled landing between the resupply runs from the newly-arrived Phoenix-class UNSC Hebe. It was not precisely "unscheduled" as it was "retroactively scheduled." The air-traffic control AI spent approximately five more seconds to plot it into an appropriate landing pad, throwing off the landings which had been calculated to the precise millisecond. This adjustment caused a cascade in the shipping schedules of the supplies, a cascade that was not officially registered with the other subsystems due to a programming oversight.

Subsequently the Army proving grounds on Marinduque would need to wait an extra week while the quartermaster tried to figure out why the M12 FAV up-armor kits had been shuffled into a corner of the warehouse that had been designated for long-term rations. Three pilots found themselves allotted space in the middle of a fuel farm on the Patag Plains with only a skeleton refueling crew to keep them company.

But this rescheduling would not have been possible if it were not for the UNSC Office of Military Intelligence. This particular dropship had no distinguishing features. It had been commandeered from the bays of the Hebe and the pilot was sweating bullets over how to explain to his flight leader why he had been called away from the briefing to fly a Pelican for an unscheduled planet-side run.

Swinging about to make the landing, the Pelican's nacelles blew up a sheet of dust and debris as they swiveled to gently lower the dropship to the ground. The two landing struts extended and touched down quickly and evenly before the rest of the Pelican settled down onto the tarmac.

It takes an average of four minutes for a suborbital insertion by a Pelican dropship to touch down given a straight shot to a landing site. By the time the new orders had been recognized by the localized base AI fragment, there were only two minutes for a welcoming party to meet them. Subsequently the M824 troop transport arrived "just in time" as the four passengers of the Pelican disembarked.

The M824 was a squat and bulky-looking four-wheel vehicle. Part of the M12 family of "Force Application Vehicles," it was intended as a pilot-recovery vehicle for whenever one hot-shot sky-jock burned out and needed to be pried from their aircraft. Officially it was the M824 Cargo/Troop Carrier. But it was commonly just referred to by the personnel operating it as the "Big 'Hog," a variation on the already-common nickname of "Warthog." The olive-drab paint shone

slightly in the sun as it drove closer. Aside from the driver, the passengers could see a rather harried-looking Navy ensign. He was likely supposed to be their escort. So much for low key.

There were four of them, all wearing baggy civilian clothes with caps and duffels. All in all, their clothes matched the previous season's trends but there was very little memorable in terms of facial features. Part of the selection process had been for looks. Candidates who were too striking received some plastic surgery on the government dime. The idea was anonymity. It was a fundamental in their trade. See, don't be seen.

The leader of the four stepped forward, his body language giving off a an air of being in control no matter the situation. He extended his hand to the ensign.

"How're you doing," he asked loudly over the sound of the Pelican's engines winding down. "You were briefed on our arrival?"

"No sir," the ensign said. "Orders were to pick you up and deliver you to the Colonel's office."

"Well, call me Lieutenant Cyan," he said, removing his cap after having his hand shaken. He gestured to the others. "Those are Petty Officer Yellow, and Sergeants Magenta and Black."

The other three only nodded.

"They don't talk much," Cyan said with an easy smile. "Now, how about that ride?"

"Yes sir, right away, sir," the ensign said. He was about to salute until he realized that the lieutenant and his subordinates had already loaded their bags onto the Big 'Hog and found seats.

Driving from the tarmac, Fort Cole seemed to spring into existence once clear of the blast shields. Sizeable vehicle depots spanned the distance between the compact buildings of the base. Fort Cole was similar in layout to the majority of UNICOM garrison facilities with fairly low walls and gates to compartmentalize the fort into distinct and defensible concentric sectors. Compared to frontier worlds and their militarized colony starter units, the space and thoughtful order of Fort Cole was a luxury.

Far Isle winter was marked by temperate weather, especially around Nua Manila. The northern and southern states were much less moderate and experienced the extremes that equatorial Nua Manila did not. What it boiled down to was a slightly chilly but dry day as they drove through tier after tier to reach the central administration building.

"Know any good watering holes?" Lieutenant Cyan asked.

"No sir," the ensign said, looking straight ahead. It was pretty clear he didn't know how to react. "We have our own recreational facilities on-base."

"Relax, Ensign," Cyan said with a laugh. "It's not a test. I just wanted to know if there were any recommended local social spots."

The ensign said nothing. They climbed the final slope into the command sector of the base. Watchtowers were laid out with dense overlapping fields of fires as compared to the lighter concentrations of the exterior sectors. Any intruder who managed to make it into the sector would find themselves bracketed with AI-targeted mortar and railgun fire that made the M41 machine guns look penny-ante.

The holographic projection on the windshield that had been guiding them led them into the staff officers' parking spaces. Compared to the utility M12s that served as staff cars and the more eclectic off-duty vehicles, the Big Hog was like a sore thumb. Even the more mundane troop transport configurations were smaller and made much less noise.

Cyan and his team had already jumped off of the transport before the driver brought them to a complete stop. Their duffels were quickly unloaded and they were on their way into the main administration building. A Marine patrol had stopped to watch them as they passed, walking as if they owned the place.

Passing through security was a breeze with the proper credentials. While visually relaxed, the guards still had their weapons close at hand as they waved the group through the scanner corridor. They were saturated with backscatter x-rays, ultrasound, a stream of regulated air, and bathed in a plethora of body-scanning sensors. From this, the security AI could detect any weapons carrying on or in a person, if they were carrying explosives or any other novel biochemical compound, and even their current and future states of mind based on a combination of heart rate, respiratory rate, perspiration, minuscule eye movements, body temperature variations, facial and body movements, subvocalization, pheromone emissions, and several other indicators of stress.

From those readings, the AI would predict and judge whether or not the person passing through the sensors was demonstrating likely hostile intention. If the AI decided that they were, an AI-guided M202 would emerge from the ceiling and escort the intruder from the mortal coil much to the displeasure of the guards' ear drums. The four of them were certainly capable of bringing lots of hostile intention, none was actively being reserved for their coming encounter. Even if they had, the official override that the AI found itself facing with deployment of the security gun would have stopped any automated reprisal.

As they went deeper into the building, the decor changed. It became older and more stately. The glass and ceramic-coated metal became early twenty-fifth century Reconstructionist with its brushed metal and warm wood tones. That in turn became twenty-third century Constructionist, which then turned into something out of the Interplanetary War. However, the uniforms of the staff did not change. They were still very much modern examples of the UNSCDF. This was where decisions were made that could change the face of the planet.

\* \* \*

><p>"And just what the fuck do you people think you're doing here on my planet?"<p>

Colonel Heinrich Prescott was the epitome of a modern officer. His office smelled of expensive liquor and Earth cigars. The man himself was almost unremarkable, if stout and beginning to bald. His accent and bearing gave him away as an Inner Colonist. A career officer, he looked the role.

"Colonel, we have our orders. We are-"

"I don't give two fucks about your orders. I don't even give one fuck. As a matter of fact, I give negative fucks about your orders. You'd have to give me a fuck and I don't exactly swing that way, Lieutenant. So what the fuck are you doing here?"

The lieutenant suppressed a sigh. "Colonel Prescott, my superiors thought it would be polite if I were to first notify you and your command as to our presence on Far Isle."

"You and what superiors? All I see here is a fucking Need-To-Know tag with a fucking scrawl from some fucking Admiral from fucking NAVCOM," Prescott said, raising the datapad up and jabbing a finger at the signature. "And that tells me absolutely jack and shit. So unless you want me to toss all of you off planet, what the fuck are you doing?"

"There's something rotten in the state of Far Isle," the lieutenant said, raising a finger. "Rumblings of discontent. You might even call it a disturbance of the peace. We're here to deal with this infection. Consider this to be a doctor's visit."

Prescott was stuck between a hard place and an even harder place. These guys were definitely ONI types. Creepy fuckers waltzed wherever they wanted and took whatever they needed. Everyone had heard stories about these sorts of guys. Black ops super secret spy squirrel shit. But those stories had a definite grounding in reality. And the orders they had were not going to be denied, especially if he had any plans for a retirement that did not involve standing in front of a firing squad if he was lucky.

"So," Prescott said after a moment. He reached for his case of cigars. "What can my garrison do for you?"

"Our AI will be forwarding any requests," the spook said. "But as for now, we need to see your armory." He paused for a moment. "Also, do you know any good bars in the city?"

"I don't frequent them," Prescott said, picking a cigar. "Will that be all, Lieutenant?" The tone of his voice dispelled any illusion created by his words.

"I do believe it will be, for now," the lieutenant said, sketching a salute.

\* \* \*

><p>He canted the pistol to the side, admiring the slight pattern from the light reflecting off the carbon fiber-wrapped slide like snake skin. A press-check revealed an empty chamber awaiting the first round. The slim single-stack magazine locked in place with a fluid click before racking the slide chambered a round of 11x22mm.<p>

"Damn shame about those," the armorer said, eyeing the ONI spook.

"What about?" the lieutenant asked, setting the safety of the compact pistol.

"Wist," she said, pronouncing the acronym for 'Weapon Systems Technologies' as a word. "Their CQ-2 line is being binned after the quality control kerfluffle."

He looked at the pistol again. "This isn't going to explode when I shoot it, right?"

"I checked it myself," she said. "Two proof rounds and it still shoots straight."

"Subsonics?"

"They'll feed just fine, but the ramp's a little fuzzy. You'll want to stick to-"

"Spitz, yeah," the lieutenant said, cutting her off. He cocked his head as if trying to remember something. "I'll need three more of these, four mags each, two boxes each, one hard, one soft. Cans too. Four M6Js, with three twenty-rounders each, with enough boxes to load each twice. Two MA3s, if you have them, with four bags. SLS/V 3B optics, and lights for them as well."

She whistled and started pulling a set of carrying cases out. "You looking to start a war, sir?"

"Not with that," he said. "Oh, and I need C-12. Five pure kilos, two cans of cut, and two 1132 kits."

"Be back in a few minutes then," she said, turning to walk away into the shelving units. Anything to get away from the ONI officer.

She wasn't sure what part of the UNSC intelligence apparatus he hailed from, but orders were orders. Judging from his shopping list, something was definitely going down on Far Isle. CQs were very technically issue sidearms for NCIS agents and whoever else needed incredibly compact offensive capability. They were weapons for killing people in back alleys. The rest of the list was just as worrying. M6Js were all but unparalleled in urban spaces, especially when you needed something with more punch than an M7 and did not want to end up overpenetrating a few city blocks like with an MA5. Which, of course, brought her to the odd request. MA3s had been all but out of issue outside of the militia units so far removed from the UNSC logistical chain. The MA37 and MA5 (a rebranding by Misriah's board of profiteers as far as she was concerned) were that much easier to find and feed. But then again, she realized with a degree of dread, so was the MA3. You could buy a box of 4x55mm hollowpoints at just about any sporting store.

With the firepower stacked up on a follow-me drone cart, she headed over to get the final items on the list. The armory was buttoned up well past the point of reasonable paranoia, but the explosives locker made the prior security measures seem outright open and naive. Enclosed in a free-standing titanium battle-plated vault whose wall

thickness was measured in meters, there was a small room whose walls were lined with rows and rows of innocuous-looking bricks. Accessing the tank-proof vault meant passing through a barrage of sensors not unlike the entry process at the door, and then opening the door itself before releasing the inner airlock.

Five kilograms of C-12 was the same weight as five kilograms of feathers, but seemed much heavier given how much energy was stored in each brick, just waiting to be released by rapid decomposition. The bricks were packed together with layers of anti-static polymer before she even approached the M1132 demolition kits or the cans of spacer. From there she had to carry things out individually since the airlock was large enough for a man in UXO kit, but not wide enough to bring the follow-me in. With that finished, the entire vault resealed itself, leaving her standing outside with a cart bearing enough raw explosive power and conventional ordnance to wipe out a dozen city blocks.

"Now what the hell are you planning, Mister ONI?" she muttered to herself before gesturing for the cart to follow her back.

\* \* \*

><p>The city of Nua Manila was actually rather pleasant, Lieutenant Cyan-Tobias Rasheed in another life-noted. Meteorological reports had predicted rain, and lots of it. Sure, it was fairly humid, but it could have been far worse for the coming rainy season.</p>

"Boss, she's ready," Sergeant Magenta-Edward Hunt-said as he walked out onto the balcony.

"Great," Rasheed said, running a hand through his newly-dyed red hair. "Were there any problems?"

"No fumigation was necessary," Hunt said, offering a bottle of microbrew to his superior. "The local is pretty good."

He accepted it without comment and turned to head inside. The apartment was like just about every other urban safehouse they had used before. Located in the middle of a lower-middle class neighborhood of mid-rise apartments, they were just about middling on the scale of averages. The landlord hadn't raised an eyebrow, not with the extra credits added to the top of the contract.

The rest of the team, Petty Officer Yellow and Sergeant Black-Nicole Vergis and Iola Severn respectively, were already standing around the small holo-pedestal. Projected from the pedestal was the image of a man in his early forties, dressed in a simple brown button-down shirt with black breeches and boots. A long thin scar ran from his left ear down to the center of his chin, highlighted like the rest of him with a neutral gray light.

"Good morning, Griffin," Rasheed said. "How do you feel?"

"Quite well, sir," the hologram replied with a warm smile, his words colored by an archaic Viennese accent. "I am fully non-compliant."

"Excellent," the lieutenant said. "Do you have any questions as to our tasking?"

"Only in the details," Griffen said. "I am correct to presume that the supplies have been acquired?"

"Everything a growing cell needs," Severn said.

"Good," Griffen said with a nod. "With your permission, I may insert myself into the planetary internet?"

"I doubt we could stop you," Rasheed said. "You have the checklist for what we need to be turned," he said more than asked.

"Everything you need, and more," Griffen said after a brief moment as his electronic tentacles reached out into the local unsecured internet. He smiled again with genuine pleasure. "Oh, I am looking forward to this, sir."

The lieutenant only nodded and hefted one of the cut blocks of C-12 thoughtfully. It wasn't all that hard to do what they had been sent to do.

"Let's go knock over a planet," he said.

\* \* \*

><p><strong>Office of Naval Intelligence Memorandum - Section 0 Archive<strong>

From: 09244-18500-NU

To: 63219-45282-CG

Topic: NAVSPEC? Really?

Has higher gone mad? I can understand sending ASWC to handle the problem. Those guys have their heads screwed on straight, and you can rely on them to get the job done with minimal fuss. Did the Admiral forget to take his lithium? Tasking NAVSPEC for this assignment is like using a blockbuster carpet to put out a campfire. Mark my words, this is going to explode in our faces.

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><p>Author's Rant: So...I've been busy. Updates for other stuff are forthcoming, but I figured a bit of stale beer would go well with Halo. Despite that bout of gunporn in the armory, I'm aiming for a minimum of gunplay in this, so if you want more of that classy-ass "Go in and shoot everyone" that I tend to write, check my other stories 'cause this one isn't for you. Commentscritiques are as always welcome, since they help me not suck.

## 2. Chapter 2

There are two types of ONI operations, the ones that failed thanks to some unbelievably glaring errors, and those that we haven't found out to have failed yet.

-Anonymous ONI operative

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><p><strong>Screaming Mimi, Uptown<strong>

\*\*Nua Manila\*\*

\*\*Far Isle\*\*

\*\*1954 Military Standard Time\*\*

\*\*23 September 2488\*\*

"What's good, \_sampit\_?"

Nell Ortega looked up from her drink, taking the offered envelope. She slid it under the table and counted the stack of pesos by touch. There was more than enough in there to keep the alat off her tail for another week. Small change compared to what the crank that the organization put on the streets brought in. She slid two of the bills off the top and handed them back to the man.

"For services rendered," she said with a smirk. "Were there any problems?"

"Not on my part," Ollie Quezon said, flicking open his pocket knife and using it to chip the brownish-red crust from his fingers. "How's the family?"

"Maria's got me on a low-carbohydrate diet again. Something she read in a maga-"

The world exploded, glass and wood shattering as bullets tore through them. The patrons of the bar dove for cover, most too late as they too were perforated. To Ortega there was no sound thanks to the overwhelming volume of gunfire. Shattered glass cut into her exposed arms as she lay flat on the floor. Rounds zipped just overhead, marked by tracers that glanced off harder surfaces, the still-burning illuminating elements breaking off the rounds and falling to the floor to sear pits in the varnished wood.

A man dropped, his chest exploding in puffs of vaporizing viscera. A woman fell, her head partially collapsed by a round to her eye socket. Gem-colored liquors splashed onto the ground and hissed as heated fragments fell upon it. The storm of tracers lit up the room even as it shattered the lights. Ortega could feel Quezon on top of her, shielding her from the worst of the fire as he shoved her to the ground.

Just as quickly as the fire started, it stopped. There was no gradual tapering off like when how Nua Manila bangers found out their weapons' magazines were not bottomless. It was as if someone had flipped a switch and the gunfire just stopped. Not giving up the opportunity, Ortega stood, shouldering Quezon out of the way as she drew the gleaming block of steel called the Misriah M6A. It was a cop gun to be sure, but it was cheap and durable.

"Nell, get down!" Quezon called, scrambling to extract his own pistol.

The door had been all but blasted off its hinges by the gunfire. She

kicked the remnants of the door out of the way and stepped out onto the street with her pistol raised. A pair of late-model Genets were peeling away from the scene, headed in different directions. There was something odd about them, but she could barely make out anything in the darkness. She heard Quezon come up from behind her, breathing heavily.

"\_Sampit\_, what the hell was that?" he asked, looking around. "The \_alat\_ are coming. We don't have time for their shit."

"Looks like we'll have plenty of time," Ortega said. The police Genets with their flashing lights were already cordoning off the ends of the block. "Your piece is registered, right?"

\* \* \*

><p>It had taken roughly an hour to get good lighting back in the Screaming Mimi. Inspector Paolo Kolchak would have preferred if the lights had been dialed down a bit though. He stepped out of the department-issue Genet and looked around.</p>

The Screaming Mimi was known neutral ground for the gangs of Nua Manila. They needed those sorts of places to avoid having the city turn into an abattoir writ large. Whoever had done this had obviously not cared about any of that. What was left of the facade was a bullet-scarred mess. He called up the preliminary report on his chatter as he walked past the knot of Gardai manning the barricades. Reports of automatic weapons fired in the neighborhood, several dead and wounded carted off to the local hospital for storage or treatment respectively. It was one of the benefits of Far Isle being under the sole governance of one national government, making the sharing of information easier, at least in theory.

But that hadn't prepared him for the bodies. Not really. There were a dozen crime scene technicians going over the scene with a pair of ARGUS drones. They collected samples and took still and video captures of the bodies for holographic compilation later. White-suited, their smocks seemed to glow with the lighting that had been brought on-scene. Wraiths might have been a better description of how they looked, hovering over the bodies.

It wasn't his first time viewing bodies. Anyone on the force who was a garda or higher had likely seen their fill of bodies in under two weeks on the job. What struck him was the sheer number of them. Most homicides in Nua Manila tended to be back alley or penthouse deals, with at most two corpses if it was some sort of murder-suicide arrangement. But this was different. There had to be some sort of record that this broke. Two dozen bodies lay where they fell, some barely touched with a few holes while others were barely recognizable with what was left of their clothes soaked in blood and mixed with bullet-shredded flesh.

Almost all of them sported banger tats, the intricate tattoos that denoted membership in one of Nua Manila's many gangs and "organized families" as they liked to be called. It was a shame, that there weren't more of them laid out dead on the floor, that was.

"Where's the better half, Inspector?" Siobhan Hoekstra asked, kneeling over one of the bodies that was lying against an interior wall. "He was kinda growing on me."

"He's probably half-asleep right now, listening to that Neo-Greco gangster rap shit and down with that mud flea fever," Kolchak groused as he pulled on fresh nitrile gloves. "So what's up with this guy?"

"He's got Carnales tats and four-millimeter entry and exit wounds," Hoekstra said, pulling the body around so he could have a look. "That vic over there," the medical examiner said, pointing to another one. "VKs. She's got larger caliber wounds. Looks like go-mag to me, but I'll need to examine this a bit closer at the lab."

Kolchak scratched his chin. "Four-millimeter? Shit, my uncle's rifle uses those. Good varmint round."

"Works good on people too," Tomas Guillou said, offering him a small evidence bag as he walked up. "We're still digging these out of the walls." There were a dozen objects no thicker than a fingernail and only a few centimeters long. "Copper-jacketed with what ARGUS says is a tungsten core. Nasty stuff."

Hoekstra looked up at the chief technician. "Tungsten's not really civilian-grade, is it? I thought only the military used that stuff."

Kolchak frowned and typed out a quick request through the police portion of the government data cloud to check in with the local UNSC garrison to see if anyone checked out the munitions stockpiles lately. He almost forgot to pocket his chatter when he saw the wall.

Whoever the shooters were, they had done a thorough job on the place. The wallpaper had been shredded and still smoldered in places. But what struck him was the sheer saturation of the place. The shooters had worked over the place methodically, judging from the blood spray and the spacing of the holes. It had definitely been automatic fire that had done this. He walked closer to examine the walls. They had swept the room at roughly waist-height, probably to maximize casualties. Then the shooters seemed to have cut the floor into discrete areas that received their thorough attention. The brutal practicality of it chilled him.

"Do we have any witnesses?" he asked the room at large.

"They're all outside," Inspector Neil Balich said, walking up with a tray of coffee. "Where's Junior?"

"Sick as a dog, you know that," Kolchak said. "Hell of a mess. What're you doing here?"

"I was in the neighborhood," Balich said, the corner of his mouth twitch upwards. "Hard not to hear the gunfire."

Balich was just like everyone else in the police force, not paid enough. He, like pretty much everyone else with any common sense, had been supplementing their incomes with a bit of cash on the side from the organized families of Nua Manila. Between a truly anemic paycheck and the rampant company store policies that the big corporations on Far Isle ran, taking money from the gangsters was the only option for many of them to keep their families' houses lit and with running

water and food.

"Anyone we know out there or on the slabs?" Kolchak asked.

"Well, Manny Two-Fingers isn't rolling around anymore, Carrie Rodriguez got both lungs popped, oh, and Ortega's about to get a ride to the local station with Razor Quezon," Balich said as he counted off on his free hand. "Oleg Sharpe got a bullet to the head, along with his boyfriend Avalos. Hey, Ortega's with the Brotherhood, right?"

"Yep." Kolchak took one of the coffees and started for the exit, glass crunching under his shoes. "Guess who gets to deal with their bullshit later?"

"Well, you know how it is," Balich said with a smirk. "Just remember when the bangers got their chrome hand cannons pointing at you, try to imagine them naked."

He nodded. "Yeah, yeah. Put the word out that nobody speaks to Ortega except for me. I want to know who the hell was stupid enough to try to start some shit with the families."

Walking back outside, he spotted Ortega easily and headed over. She was being checked over by a medical technician with her hands flex-cuffed with a buckmesh restraint. A garda kept an eye on her, an evidence bag with an M6 in his hand, her M6 most likely. Kolchak sat down next to her on the curb and offered her the coffee.

"Bean Ortega," he said by way of greeting. "Anything I can get you?"

"My pistol would be nice," she said, handing back the cup after a sip. "It's registered and everything. Brand new, too."

He looked up at the officer, who handed him the bag with a moment's hesitation. Breaking the seal, Kolchak extracted the silvery pistol and racked it twice to make sure it was clear. Sniffing the barrel and ejector port before toggling the slide release, he offered it to her.

"We keep an eye on things. Hasn't been fired, and it isn't wet, so I figure we can be reasonable-like about this," Kolchak said.

"In case you didn't notice, alat, my hands aren't exactly free," she replied with a quirked eyebrow before he returned the pistol to its bag.

"So, what happened?"

"Your guess is as good as mine, alat," Ortega said. "Just having a drink, and then some fucker unloaded on the bar."

"You know if anyone pissed anyone else off enough to shoot up the Mimi?" he asked. "And before you say anything, let me remind you that business is doing pretty well right now, barring, well, this. You don't need to say anything if you don't want to, but if we have to investigate, the Commissioner's going to need to make it look legit. That means SWAT crashing around and slotting anyone with a gun. You and I both don't want this, right?"

"VKs were edging in on our ground, that's for sure," Ortega said after a moment's consideration. "But we weren't on shooting terms. Not yet, at least."

"Well, we found Ronnie and Carlo inside. If you're at war, I don't think they got the memo."

"Then I'm out of ideas, alat. You have any..." she trailed off, staring at one of the Genets. Her eyes unfocused for a moment. "I don't have any ideas. Can I go?"

"Just a quick processing at the precinct," Kolchak said, pretending not to notice the lapse as he stood up. "Try to remember your statement."

"It's got the benefit of being true," Ortega said as he walked away.

\* \* \*

><p><strong>Nua Manila City Morgue, Downtown<strong>

\*\*Nua Manila\*\*

\*\*0823 Military Standard Time\*\*

"You okay there, Inspector?"

Kolchak waved dismissively. "I'm fine, stims are kicking in is all. So what's the word on the bodies?"

Hoekstra looked at him for a moment before calling up fresh screens on the glass holoboard closest to her. The city morgue's examination room was bare gleaming tile that reflected the light from the ceiling-mounted illumination strips a little too well. They also lit up the row of tables that now populated the room in addition to the one they were standing in front of.

"Vic in this case is your standard banger. Timothy Mutter. Male, late twenties, liver and kidneys are cirrhotic and scarred, consistent with heavy use of alcohol and tiletamine, or at least that's what we can tell from what's left of them. Multiple GSWs to the lower thoracic cavity." She picked one image and blew it up on the board for Kolchak to see. "Here's the MRI we did at the scene. Wound channels and recovered slugs confirm the two calibers used, four-millimeter and twelve-point-seven."

Kolchak whistled, rubbing his goatee. The man almost looked asleep under the orange glow of the sterile field generator. Almost. His face had peeled back slightly around a pair of gunshot wounds, which revealed a part of his cheekbone. Stripped of his clothes and cleaned up, his torso was peppered with small cuts from shrapnel, but that was not the main attraction.

"Multiple GSWs to the lower thoracic cavity" was a polite way of saying "Almost sawed in half at the belly button." Hoekstra or one of the other examiners had extracted the organs which were sitting in tubs next to the body. That had left the corpse looking somewhat deflated, his pale skin waxen and resembling a macabre tarp pitched

on what was left of his ribcage. Hoekstra turned to look up at one of the camera bubbles.

"Anything you would like to add, Horatio?"

"Doctor Hoekstra, the wounds are extremely close together, not matching the typical profile of sustained automatic fire. Microscopic tattooing indicates close-range shooting," the even tone of the morgue AI came across as a detached observer, worryingly so. There was something about how dumb AIs interacted with him that worried Kolchak.

"Where did crime scene find this one?" he asked, walking over another board and calling up the holograph. "Looks about right. Horatio, how would you characterize the shooting?"

"Inspector Kolchak, the trajectories indicate a focused aim uncharacteristic of traditional gangland shootings. The ballistic trauma profile fits aimed bursts or extremely rapid semi-automatic fire, suggesting a trained background or access to semi-automatic firearms. The rounds recovered are sufficiently common that this may have been a territorial dispute with a new group."

Kolchak nodded and pulled out his chatter. "Right, Horatio, coordinate with Calleigh or another one of your AI buddies. I want a work-up on possible new players in Nua Manila based on recent arrivals from the smaller cities. Prioritize on any citizens with prior military service. Upload results to my workspace as soon as you're finished."

"Order confirmed, Inspector Kolchak."

"And now I'm going back to the precinct and reading the murderboard until this all makes sense," he said, taking a dramatic bow. His chatter buzzed, and he took a look at the caller's identification before accepting the call. "Hey, kiddo, sorry about last night, I got called in on some business. Is your mother okay?"

"Say hello to the wife and kids for me," Hoekstra called as he walked off.

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><p><strong>City Hall, Midtown<strong>

\*\*Nua Manila\*\*

\*\*0941 Military Standard Time\*\*

Nothing quite like an early morning press conference to reinforce a habitual dislike of the press. Mayor Giorgio Heyer sat back in his chair, sinking into the plush leather. The first drink of the day, an imported Harvest whiskey, sat on his desk in front of him. The mayor's office was a grand affair with gilt and marble everywhere, patterned on some old Earth style of conspicuous consumption. He took a sip of the smoky liquor and sighed.

"Okay, get the Commissioner in here."

Commissioner Aldric Lester was a big man, a decades-old veteran of

the force. Somewhere along the way he had picked up a taste for politics and had wormed his way into three mayors' cabinets. He was good at his job though. He understood that crime could not be eradicated, merely contained. But if push came to shove, Lester had enough swing to authorize deploying the Garda de la Paz in force on the streets to "enforce the peace." He knew it, and everyone he worked with knew it.

But thanks to him, Heyer controlled the city like a fiefdom. It was small consolation for the world-state that existed on Far Isle. They were far away from Earth for the colonists to want their own individual nations on the planet, but also far enough for the Colonial Administration Authority to require a much economic form of regulation. So rather than allowing formal divisions among the diverse settlers, they had mandated a singular authority of a president and a planetary senate. It made sense in a twisted way, but it also made it that much easier to enjoy the fruits of his labor to the top of the city. Bureaucratic gridlock was a wonderful way of ensuring that nobody tried to stop you from wetting your beak with some hard-earned rewards.

"Aldric, give me some good news, and fix yourself a drink," Heyer said before bringing his glass up for another drink and then pressing a switch to call up the holoboards built into the table surface. "Is there anything that you can find out about these shooters?"

"Nothing so far," Lester said. He pointedly stepped past the bar and continued speaking. "Although I'm currently assembling a task force to deal with it."

"And there's nothing I can possibly use for the update in two hours?"

"Not nothing, Your Honor," Lester said after a moment. He unlocked his chatter and streamed a copy of the incident data to the mayor's private cloud from the morgue servers. Immediately, several terabytes of raw images and barely collated holography began to stream across the previously-transparent boards. "It is still being processed by the AI. But whoever it is, it's pretty clear they're not playing sides with this."

"So a new gang? Great." The mayor dismissed the images and finished his drink. "Have your boys round up a few locals and ask them some questions. Politely. I need something to tell the governor if he asks during tomorrow's meet and greet."

Lester smiled thinly. "They're already on it."

\* \* \*

><p><strong>Millennium Motor Court, Uptown<strong>

\*\*Nua Manila\*\*

\*\*1041 Military Standard Time\*\*

"Who the hell even cruises for hookers in the morning?"

Vergis sketched a shrug, gritting her teeth as she exerted more

pressure. She could feel the nails trying to push through her gloves, but she maintained her grip. These things were won through persistence and a ready supply of air. She had both. The street walker that she was working on had neither.

Strangulation was a simple enough task, but the trouble arose when you needed to make a specific point of it. She could have simply applied any number of holds to cut off the circulation of blood to the brain, or just used a rope and be done with it. But those methods were unsubtle. Which left her on a motel bed wearing a medical technician's smock with thick rubber gloves that came up just past her elbows. The thrashing woman beneath her hands had not even entered the equation.

"You want to give it a go?" she asked as the struggling died down. "I wish the boss'd try doing some of this crap himself."

Hunt laughed as he opened the bottle of liquor. "I think he's done his fair share. And I can't, remember? The marks need to be made by a single person." He inhaled the fruity scent of the spirit and sighed as he poured the contents of a vial into the newly-opened bottle and swirled it around. "It's a damn shame we don't have any more of this. Feels like a waste doing this."

"Well, get ready," Vergis said, ignoring him. "I can feel it just about to- Ah, there we go," she said as the arms that had been clawing at her fell away. "Her trachea just gave out. Come on, let's get her watered."

Hunt walked over and gently poured some of the liquor into the already-open mouth. Getting a good measure in, the two of them levered the body up and tilted the head back for a few seconds before returning it to its original position.

"Okay, now what?" Hunt asked with a sigh. "I hate these jobs. Too much hurrying up and waiting."

"What, this is your first rodeo?" Vergis asked, an eyebrow raised. "Get the stimulator kit."

"One stimulator kit coming up," Hunt said as he reached into the duffel next to him. "And yeah, this is the first time I've been on an op that needed a Waingro to be done."

"Creeped out or something?" Vergis asked. She took the offered kit and started to attach the electrodes to the corpse. "It's okay. First one I did, I puked a little. As long as you don't throw up on the body, nobody really cares."

"It's not that," Hunt said. "What do you think the boss is doing?" he asked, abruptly changing the topic.

"We'll probably hear it from here if he screws it up."

\* \* \*

><p><strong>ONI Safehouse, Midtown<strong>

\*\*Nua Manila\*\*

\*\*1052 Military Standard Time\*\*

"And that's the second to last of them," Severn said, stifling a yawn as she replaced the caps on the detonators. "Thanks, chief," she said, accepting the mug of coffee. "Can we get some better ear protection? I saw this great place on the local web."

"Maybe later," Rasheed said. He turned to the holo-pedestal. "Griffin, anything?"

The AI's avatar flashed into existence with a broad smile. "Financial measures are running to specification, sir. The results are being packeted and sent to the accounts we set up last night. I must say we are quite a profitable internet gambling site. Several, in fact."

Rasheed smiled as he peeled open a cube of C-12 to hand off to Severn. It was interesting to watch the biofoam-like "cut" being worked into the explosive. The small cube seemed to balloon into a large brick by the time the bomb maker was done. That was then lowered into a polymer-wrapped jacket of mixed ingredients, all sure to liven any emergency room's day. Wells were punched with a wooden dowel to avoid any unpleasantness from metallic objects coming too close to the stuff without need. The entire package was then sealed with a dab of epoxy before being set aside.

"Okay, when Hunt and Vergis get back, I want you guys to start sorting them out for delivery. I have a meeting to get to," he said, pulling on a jacket.

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><p><strong>Rourke's Social Club, Uptown<strong>

\*\*Nua Manila\*\*

\*\*1703 Military Standard Time\*\*

The dull booming of the bass made the back of Ortega's teeth rattle. She sat back and brought the shisha pipe to her lips while admiring the writhing forms on the main stage. Another calming hit of the loa washed away the cares of the world for a few seconds. Her tolerance had long since built up that it no longer had the buzz it used to. That was the trouble with the loa sometimes, no staying power. But at least she could still think clearly. The cool vapors of the drug permeated her lungs, tasting of burnt metal and strawberries as she exhaled.

"So, what did you see, Nell?" Roman Orjuela asked, sipping his glass of milk.

"It wasn't the VKs, or the Rollers," she said after a moment. "Manny Two-Fingers was there, same with Cassandra."

"My sympathies, my child," Orjuela said, reaching over to pat her hand. "I know you had your difficulties."

"She chose her road, and I chose mine," Ortega said, speaking around the momentary lump in her throat. "But I don't think it was any of the Uptown or Midtown families. Or even the Discipline. This was too

clean, boss."

Roman Orjuela had all but adopted her off the streets of Nua Manila. The head of the Carnales, he dominated the social club with his mere presence. He rolled the stub of his cigar between his callused fingers as he considered the information.

"What do you mean it was too clean?"

"It was like the entire thing was rigged, sir," she said. "By the time those assholes drove off, the police were just arriving on the scene." Ortega paused for a moment, considering something.

"What is it?" Orjuela asked, picking up her reluctance. "What was it about the shooting?"

"The cars, boss," she said after taking another hit. "They were Genets. Alat Genets."

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><p>Author's Rant: Yep, <em>much<em> darker fare than what I normally do. For anyone who doesn't recognize the slang and italicized terminology, ask someone who does. It all makes sense when you realize that I'm portraying Far Isle as a predominantly Irish-Filipino planet. Any particular distinctions you make from that, well, they might be true. Check the story on SpaceBattles since FFnet apparently doesn't like how I formatted AI-to-AI conversations, so I've made the choice to remove that segment for publishing here. Comments/critiques/cries of horror fuel the writing machine, so feel free to leave a comment.

And for a moment to actually rant about stuff... I really don't like Glasslands. I originally started out as a fan of Traviss with Hard Contact and Triple Zero, where the clones were clones, the Separatists were Separatists, and the Mandalorians were sidecast. But I've gradually grown disillusioned by the crap that she keeps putting out and calling "literature." Besides the flagrant errors in the tech presented in Glasslands, as well as beyond the utter fuck-up of a timeline, Traviss basically decided to go full-on soap-boxing about her views. Sure, my Armywank in Halo is fairly blatant, but I don't go about screaming at the top of my lungs in every other paragraph that "The UNSC Army is the best and only hope of humanity in Halo!" (And if I do, I sincerely apologize.) At each and every turn, characterization that had been established over several books is tossed right out the window. The fact that Parangosky had authorized the mass and possibly industrialized conscription of children (Let's do some math. 300 SPARTAN-IIIs per graduating company, which does not include the washouts. Three graduating companies with one more in the works. What does that equal? At bare minimum 1200 children conscripted) is basically dismissed in favor of condemning Halsey for conscripting seventy-five. And then there is the matter of the flash-cloning, which was similarly tossed out the window despite the process being notably established as expensive as fuck, highly-regulated, and requiring the authorization from the higher-ups in ONI before getting cleared. But no, not according to Traviss!

Hell, then there's the matter of Mendez suddenly developing a conscience after being responsible for the training of some 1275 children into brainwashed super soldiers. His pit of shit is deeper than Halsey's, and he doesn't have a damn stepladder to use, just like her. And that's not even getting into the actual plot and happenings of the story.

Which brings me to explaining something for people still wondering what the guy with the weird guy-on-a-unicorn avatar is rambling on about: If you favor moral certainties, clear-cut heroes, and good triumphing over evil, "An Easy Road" is not for you. Traviss tried to make a black ops team out of Kilo-Five and wound up with a band of identically-minded identically-voiced characters who might as well all be named "Karen Traviss" for all the effort it's been given. The NAVSPEC team here is...significantly different. They will lie to, cheat, steal from, and outright commit mass murder upon the people of Far Isle. Why? Because it's what it takes to accomplish their mission. Because this is for the betterment of the people of the planet. Because for them, they see it as the lesser of a great number of evils. I leave it up to you to decide whether or not they're right or wrong.

End  
file.